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Life Cycle Changes Are Leading to More Frequent Church Attendance

Survey findings from the first half of 1991 offer evidence that church membership and attendance may be slowly regaining lost ground. Particularly heartening are findings that the growth that is taking place is not a temporary phenomenon precipitated by people who flocked to churches during the Persian Gulf War, but appears instead to be the result of natural patterns in the life cycle of American adults. This appears to be particularly true of the baby boomers, whose arrival at the age when people traditionally take greater interest in church affairs has been awaited by some and doubted by others.

Basic attitudes towards religion have been relatively stable in recent years. Behavioral measurements, however, suggest a gradual return to previous patterns of religious practice and belief. Church membership was claimed by 65% of adults in 1990. There was an insignificant increase to 66% in early 1991, but the ranks have swelled to 69% in the latest May 1991 Gallup Poll. This matches the membership averages for the 1980s decade, but still is four to five percentage points lower than the historical highs in church membership found in the era of the 1930s to 1960s.

Attendance in an average week had dropped to 40% in 1990, but returned to an average of 43% by May in 1991. This matches the previous high over the past 20-year period, but it remains to be seen whether this level can be maintained throughout 1991. (Attendance often is lower during the Summer months and in the Fall before the Thanksgiving and Christmas periods begin.)

Compared to five years ago, 27% of the adults say they are attending religious services more frequently than before. An additional 32% say there has been no change in their frequency of attendance. Less frequent attendance is claimed by 38%, and only 2% report they have never gone to religious services.

An examination of the findings on this question shows that those who are more frequent attenders closely conform to the profile of people who are most likely to be church members: residents of the South and Midwest, the college educated, women, and blacks.

Of particular interest is the finding that the 30 to 49 years-of-age group shows steadfast attendance, with 34% reporting increased frequency of attendance and 31% saying they are still going to services as frequently as five years ago.

The Reason Why

In this most recent survey, Gallup asked respondents in an "open-ended" question, without prompting, to state the one or two leading reasons that would account for their increase or decrease in attendance over the past five years. Preliminary analysis of the reasons people gave is revealing.

A person's position in the life cycle appears to have strongest bearing upon frequency of attendance. Young adults, for example, may temporarily leave the church when they go off to school or leave home, but later in life, marriage, children and family formation, reinforced by a need for fellowship and community, give strong impetus to many to return to the church. Some who are older find that handicaps, infirmities and lack of transportation make it more difficult to get to church as often as they like. Others find that retirement has given them more time to enjoy the offerings of religious services, and still others associate advanced age with the wisdom and maturity that leads to increased religious participation.

Very few have turned away from religious belief because of atheism or agnosticism, and they are far outnumbered by those who say they have found new strength through faith, belief, spirituality, or prayer.

Many who have stopped going as frequently in the past can only offer the excuse that they are too busy. Others perhaps more legitimately point out that church schedules too

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The illuminated capital letters in this month's issue are taken from a German Gothic revival alphabet of the 1880's.

Life Cycle Changes...

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often are in conflict with weekend working hours or the relentless pressures of business or studies. Yet, there are others who view church as a place where, in the midst of life's troubles, inner peace can be found so that they can feel good about themselves.

There are some who have been disillusioned by the scandals of recent years and what they see as money grubbing aspects of the church, but they are outnumbered by those whose disagreement is an aspect of their spiritual journey as they dissent with the teachings of their denomination or seek a local place of worship that more closely reflects their views. For some the church may be too liberal; for others it seems too conservative. Some denounce the involvement of churches in political and social issues; others see the church as a place where hypocrisy and bigotry can rear their ugly heads.

Reasons to be Audited Annually

PRRC and Gallup intend to repeat annually these questions on frequency of attendance and the reasons for increases or decreases. On future surveys, however, respondents will be shown a card of frequently cited reasons. In this way we shall be able to track individual forces working for or against attendance with more precision than is possible through open-ended questioning.

The most recent findings are based upon a telephone survey with a representative nationwide sample of 1,012 adults, 18 and older, conducted during the last week of May 1991. For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be plus or minus 4 percentage points.

Reasons for Going to Church More Frequently

(Based on those now going more frequently than five years ago)

What are the two main reasons that you attend more frequently?

For our children	18%
Worship as a family	11
Now married	1
Now have stronger faith, belief	18
Spiritual reasons, prayer	2
Following Biblical principles	1
I like going, makes me feel good	10
Gives guidance, inner peace, need it	4
Need its support	3
I am older, maturer, wiser	10
Suffered a loss of a loved one	2
I have reformed	2
Survived a life-threatening incident	2
Now divorced	1
Because of the current world situation	6
The fellowship	5
Enjoy the social aspects	1
So much is going on there	1
Have become more involved	4
Now have more time	4
Have greater need now	4
Got back in the habit, returned	2
Retired and have more time	1
Home more now	1
Born again	1
Catholic faith	1
Found Christ	1
Bible study	1
Found a good church	1
Church, pastor have improved	1
Church is closer than before	1
Now work for the church	2
Active in Christian education	1
To help others	1
Other	5

Note: Total adds to more than 100% because some respondents gave more than one reason.

Reasons for Going Less Frequently

What are the two main reasons that you attend less frequently?

Have no time, too busy	19%
Conflicts with work, study schedule	14
Travel too much	1
Disagree with policies, teachings	8
Hypocrisy, bigotry, close-minded	4
Stand on political/social issues	2
Dissident Catholic	2
Dislike the sermons, preaching	1
Doesn't meet my needs	7
Haven't found church that matches beliefs	1
Illness	6
Handicapped	1
Too commercial, money hungry	5
Scandals	2
Move around too much, new to community	4
Too far to travel	3
No transportation	2
Stopped going when left parents' home	3
Too lazy	3
Got out of the habit	2
Can't get up in the morning	1
Don't like organized religion	3
Too old-fashioned	1
Too modern	1
Life style has changed	3
Too old	2
Children have left	2
Tending to small children	2
Interfaith marriage is disruptive	1
Divorced	1
Boring, no interest	3
Not brought up in the church	1
Atheist, non-believer	4
Agnostic	1
Other	9
Not sure	7

Note: Total adds to more than 100% because some respondents gave more than one reason.

Changes in Church Attendance in Past Five Years

Would you say that you attend religious services more frequently now than you did five years ago, or less frequently?

	More frequent	Same amount	Less frequent	Never went	No response
National	27%	32%	38%	2%	1%
Male	22	34	40	4	*
Female	32	30	36	1	1
Ages 18-29	30	17	50	3	-
Ages 30-49	34	31	33	2	*
Age 65+	19	42	35	3	1
College graduates	29	36	31	3	1
Some college	28	33	36	2	1
High school graduates	26	33	39	2	-
Non-H.S. graduates	26	26	44	3	1
White	26	33	37	3	1
Black	30	24	44	2	-
East	23	33	41	3	*
Midwest	28	33	36	3	-
South	33	31	35	1	-
West	22	32	40	4	2
$50,000+	29	31	38	2	*
$30,000-$39,999	28	33	38	1	*
$20,000-$29,999	27	36	32	5	-
Less than $20,000	27	28	44	1	-
Protestant	31	32	36	1	*
Catholic	26	34	39	1	*
None	4	29	46	21	-

*Less than one-half of 1 percent.

Recent Trends

How important would you say religion is in your own life--very important, fairly important, or not very important?

Do you believe that religion can answer all or most of today's problems, or that religion is largely old-fashioned and out of date?

Do you happen to be a member of a church or synagogue?

Did you happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days or not?

	1990	March 1991	May 1991
Importance of religion			
Very important	56%	55%	57%
Fairly important	30	29	30
Not very important	13	16	13
Can religion answer today's problems?			
Yes	63%	60%	59%
No	18	23	22
Church membership			
Yes	65%	66%	69%
No	34	33	31
Attended services in last seven days			
Yes	40%	43%	43%
No	60	57	57

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Prepare for the Future with These Valuable Studies

Emerging Trends - Commentary on surveys on religious beliefs and practices; 10 issues a year; annual subscription is $35 domestic, $45 foreign.

The Role of the Bible in American Society by George Gallup, Jr. and Robert Bezilla provides a comprehensive overview of attitudes towards the Bible and trends on Bible reading and knowledge of the Scriptures. Cost per copy is $9.95.

Religion in America 1990 - Annual report on the key measures on religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices, and predictions for the 1990s. Cost per copy is $30.

The Unchurched American - 10 Years Later - An important update on the factors that cause people to leave the church, and those that cause them to return. Cost per copy is $29.

100 Questions and Answers by George Gallup, Jr. and Sarah Jones. A single-volume compendium of the 100 most important questions we have surveyed in the area of religion. A handy reference tool in book size format that categorizes and analyzes key survey data. Price per copy is $30.

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If you would like to place an order, please include $2.00 for postage and handling. If you would like to receive more information about these publications, contact the Princeton Religion Research Center, 47 Hulfish Street, P.O. Box 389, Princeton NJ 08542. Telephone (609) 921-8112.

Religion Has Early Impact on Teen Volunteering and Giving

Religion would appear to have an early impact upon voluntarism and charitable giving, according to the findings of a survey conducted by Gallup for the Independent Sector. Among the 75% of teens who reported that they were members of religious institutions, 62% were also volunteers, and 56% were charitable contributors. By contrast, among those who reported no religious affiliation, far fewer were either volunteers (44%) or contributors (25%).

Indeed, beyond just membership, active involvement in religious organizations has an even greater impact on teen philanthropy. The proportion of the teen population that volunteered increased from 34% among the 16% of respondents who never attended religious services to 73% among the 41% who said they attend religious services weekly. Similarly, the proportion who made charitable contributions increased from 17% among non-attenders to 69% among regular weekly attenders.

When these percentages are translated into hours and dollars, the impact is enormous. It is estimated that teen volunteers donate an annual total of 1.6 billion hours in voluntary service. Even when such informal activities as babysitting for free or baking cookies for a school fair are eliminated, the estimate of formal voluntary services is 1.2 billion hours. These hours are estimated by Independent Sector to represent the services of 766,000 employees, valued at $4.4 billion.

When asked how they got involved in their volunteer activity, the majority of teens said it was either through the schools (52%) or through a church or synagogue (50%).

The most frequently cited reasons by teens for first volunteering and for continuing to give service were that they wanted to do something useful in their lives and because they felt they would enjoy the work. In return, teens were most likely to cite that as a result of their service they acquired such skills as getting along with and relating to other people (32%), how to be kind, helpful and respectful (20%), learning how to take care of children (14%), and feeling better about themselves (12%).

The great majority of teens (85%) rated their experience as volunteers as good or very good. Less than 1 percent said their voluntary experience was not good at all. Not surprisingly then, 53% of the teen volunteers said they are now volunteering more hours than they did two years ago.

Among those who reported charitable contributions, the annual average of all donations is $46. Three in four (77%) of the teens channeled their contributions through a religious organization.

The findings are based on personal interviews with a nationwide sample of 300 teen-agers, 14 through 17, conducted by Gallup during the period of March to April 1990.

The survey was sponsored by the Independent Sector. Copies of the full report, **Volunteering and Giving Among American Teenagers 14 to 17 years of Age**, are available in various formats from Independent Sector, 1828 L Street, N.W., Washington DC 20036.

Profile - Teen Volunteers and Givers

	Teen volunteers	Teen contributors
National	58%	48%
Male	51	46
Female	65	51
East	56	51
Midwest	66	52
South	50	54
West	62	31
Protestant	62	64
Catholic	60	51
All others	48	44

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Future Projects

Here is an advance look at the books and reports you can expect to see from PRRC in the coming year.

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The PRRC Survey Research Manual will enable local congregations to conduct their own accurate low-cost surveys on the issues they face.

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PRRC Style Guide for Writers on Religion is being compiled to aid those who write about religion for inter-faith, inter-denominational, or lay audiences.

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The New Age: Magic, Science, or Religion? will present an in-depth report on how Americans view a wide range of New Age beliefs and practices.

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The Religious Life of Young Americans is being developed by the Gallup International Institute to provide a much needed compendium of recent survey research on the religious attitudes of young people, ages 12-24.

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Librarians and others soon will be able to subscribe to current and back files of the Gallup Religion Poll. The library community should be happy to learn that we are busy assigning ISBN and ISSN designators to all past, current and future PRRC publications.

Here Come the Baby Boomers!

By now we assume just about everyone has heard or read about the baby boomers and the impact they are likely to have on organized religion. Born in the post-World War II era between 1946 and 1964, they are now 26 to 45 years of age, and account for nearly half of the U.S. adult population (43%). This means they are now at the age when people historically have usually become most active in the affairs of the church as a center for educating children and integrating the family in the fabric of the local congregation. If the pattern holds true, many churches can expect their ranks to swell if the age group is present in the community. If, however, for some reason the baby boomers do not turn to the church, the outlook for many local congregations could be bleak.

A Gallup Poll taken earlier this year suggests strongly that the baby boomers will be no exception to the historical trend, but will soon start taking their place in churches, synagogues and mosques throughout the land if they have not done so already.

The baby boomers usually see their work as very important but seldom view it as an end in itself. They hope to peak early and to slow down or retire at an age when they can devote themselves fully to family, friends, religion, a search for the meaning of life, and simply having fun and recreation.

There is no sign of the gloom and doom prophesies of "diminished expectations" by some forecasters that this generation will expect and have to settle for less than their parents. They want it all, and they expect to get it all. Compared to their parents, most boomers expect they eventually will be better off financially, have a more satisfactory personal life, and lead a happier family life.

"*All*" for the baby boomers centers around family life—forget about the forecasts that the nuclear family is dead. Individually, it is clear boomers will be undergoing a great deal of soul-searching in the next few years, and probably beyond. They want to know the meaning of life, but most reject New Age or alternative beliefs to attain this insight, and focus upon religion instead.

Boomer men now lag behind their female counterparts in current ratings on the importance of religion of their lives, but both sexes usually see religion as becoming more important in the next five years. Those expecting to spend more time with religious activities in the future far outweigh the boomers who anticipate less time. Formal religious affiliation is slightly lower than the overall average for adults, but there is every indication that more boomers will join the church in the next years. Children undoubtedly are a driving force in bringing boomers to the church, because most want them to receive a religious education.

Levels of Bible reading and study, prayer and meditation, and activity in the church in their lives are all expected by baby boomers to hold steady or increase over the next five years as important parts of their lives.

The results are based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national sample of 477 adults, ages 26-45, conducted February 21-24, 1991.

Religious Activity in Next Five Years

	Boomer men	Boomer women
Prayer/meditation		
More	41%	43%
Same	52	51
Less	7	5
Attending services		
More	36%	39%
Same	56	56
Less	8	5
Bible/religious study		
More	26%	30%
Same	54	54
Less	19	13
Bible reading		
More	40%	41%
Same	49	49
Less	11	8
Prayer groups		
More	23%	27%
Same	51	48
Less	24	22
Active in church		
More	38%	37%
Same	54	53
Less	8	9
Exploring New Age and other alternatives		
More	12%	11%
Same	33	39
Less	44	41

Boomers and Religion

	Boomer men	Boomer women
Importance of Religion		
Very important	39%	58%
Fairly important	42	31
Not very important	18	11
Importance next 5 years		
More important	61%	66%
Same	25	20
Less important	13	12
Time you will spend on religious activities next 5 years		
More time	37%	44%
Same amount	55	52
Less time	7	3
Church Member?		
Yes	61%	69%
No	39	31
Non-members expecting to join next 5 years		
Yes	38%	39%
No	55	57
Not sure	7	4
Want children to receive religious education?		
Yes	73%	78%
No	17	15
Not sure/not applicable	10	7

Implications

Examination of the reasons people give for attending religious services more or less frequently than in the past, may offer some ideas on how to help others to become more involved in the affairs of the local congregation. You may wish to read the results on pages 1-3 with this in mind, and see what insights you can generate from the findings. Please share your ideas with us by writing to the **Editor, Emerging Trends, Princeton Religion Research Center, 47 Hulfish Street, P.O. Box 389, Princeton, NJ 08542.** *We will publish and acknowledge the most interesting ideas in a forthcoming issue. To help you get started, we list below some of the reflections we had as we reviewed the survey findings.*

- Because most states and communities have abandoned "blue laws," many people now are working during traditional Sunday morning hours or shortly thereafter. Non-traditional worship service hours could be welcome alternatives in some communities.
- In a recessionary economy many people must hold down two or even three jobs to make ends meet. Students who fall asleep during classes because they work long hours to pay tuition costs or help the family's economy may also be excused if they consider Sunday a day of rest and nothing more. What can the church do to help?
- Many women today want both a family and a career. How are our churches meeting these greater demands upon their time and what it does to the traditional family?
- Some people who say they dislike "organized religion" may only be rebelling against large churches. Can small groups within the church better meet their spiritual needs?
- It is painful when people leave a church because of disagreement with its teachings or doctrines. It is comforting to know they may find another church that meets their needs. Just as others left their previous church because your congregation was more to their liking.
- Not only is youth wasted on the young, education may also be as well. We tend to forget that as people mature, they become more receptive to advanced studies in religion.
- Can you think of someone who will not be able to go to church this weekend unless you offer him a ride?
- Young people are marrying and forming families at a later age. Their need for family identity and community fellowship can be all the greater for that reason. Because they have been single longer, we must be patient as they learn to achieve unity again.
- There are many single parents and even more children of single parents. Are churches including them in their plans and in their definitions of families?
- Radical changes in one's life, crisis, or loss may not only require consolation and contemplation, but can trigger a spiritual awakening that if nourished can lead to wondrous things.

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